

# Post-Katrina School Reform Has Not Been Successful in New Orleans

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*Hurricane Katrina, 2010*

Craig Chamberlain, "Professor Sees Inequity, Little Change, in Post-Katrina School Reform," News Bureau, University of Illinois, August 23, 2006. Reproduced by permission.

Craig Chamberlain is the editor of education for the News Bureau at the University of Illinois.

Luis Mirón, currently the director of the Institute for Quality and Equity in Education at Loyola University in New Orleans, has conducted a study that points to serious inequities among the schools opened in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. Schools serving middle-class students were opened quickly while those serving low-income students were not opened until later. In addition, the community was not involved in the establishment of charter schools, nor was there careful planning of curriculum. It is likely that many teachers hired by the Recovery School District will be under-qualified as well. Mirón's report concludes that school reform should come from within, not be imposed by the state, to be successful.

Can a devastating flood set the stage for the transformation of a school system?

Many saw an opportunity to find out in New Orleans in the wake of hurricane Katrina last August [2005]. The state took over most of the city's schools and began an effort to reopen as many as possible as charter schools.

The result is "one of the most massive experiments in urban education ever conducted," according to Luis Mirón, an education professor at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and a New Orleans native, who has advised and studied New Orleans schools for 20 years.

## Troubling Inequities

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Mirón has documented and studied the progress of that "experiment" during the year since Katrina, with help from graduate students Robert Ward and Maria Lovett, and so far is not encouraged by the results. He has seen troubling inequities in the way schools have been reopened, evidence of serious underfunding of the charter schools that have been opened, and few real improvements in the curriculum or in classroom instruction.

With a new school year beginning, the state-run Recovery School District, serving most of the city's low-income and at-risk students, finds itself scrambling to find the teachers it needs—many likely to be under-qualified—for thousands of expected students.

[Education professor Luis Mirón] has seen troubling inequities in the way schools have been reopened, evidence of serious underfunding of the charter schools that have been opened, and few real improvements in the curriculum or in classroom instruction.

Central to some of these problems is that the state never took the time or did the outreach to get "buy-in" from the community or teachers for the charter school concept, Mirón said. That buy-in is "ultimately what makes any of these reform models go," he said. "Charter schools won't work without that level of community involvement."

## Not Enough Time Spent on Curriculum

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They also never took the time or did the hard work to plan a new curriculum that would raise the level of instruction, Mirón said.

"One of the lessons from this is don't wait for a hurricane" to start implementing school reforms, Mirón said.

"Take the time to do it and fund it adequately ... invest early on into innovation and reform, rather than wait for a crisis or catastrophe."

The argument could be made, Mirón said, that the state had to move fast just to get schools reopened, and didn't have the luxury of time for involving the community or planning real change.

"But that argument doesn't hold much weight, because the state was very slow to open up schools," even when resources were clearly available to do so, he said. On the other hand, "the state was very fast to license and approve charters."

A group of schools on the West Bank section of New Orleans, serving mostly middle-class students and a large proportion of "gifted and talented" students, was quickly turned into charter schools and, with federal help, reopened by January, Mirón said. During the same time, several thousand low-income and special needs students were unable to attend school at all because of lack of access or transportation, he said.

"The reason they moved so fast is because they wanted to get the charter school model—this flexible, privately governed model—away from the public school board, a majority-black, elected school board, and put it in the hands of independent private organizations," he said.

## New Orleans Schools Needed Reforming

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Mirón said he agreed with the general consensus before Katrina that the New Orleans schools were failing and in need of serious reform. For at least two decades, "the school system had resisted every single reform that came out the door," he said, and the city, with its fragmented politics, "could never get behind a single vision for its schools."

Mirón began following developments in New Orleans schools as a staffer with the Bureau of Governmental Research in New Orleans during the mid- to late-1980s, when he developed educational policy proposals for the school system. He then became a professor in the Urban Education lab at the University of New Orleans, where he also worked on reform efforts with schools in the system. He has continued to study developments in the system as he moved to new academic posts in California and Illinois.

"I'm still optimistic that New Orleans will be better off post-Katrina with the charter model than they were pre-Katrina, but time is a valuable resource," Mirón said. The city and the state may have lost anywhere from one to five years in its attempts so far to transform the schools, he said, "but I do believe that it's still salvageable."

## State Takeover Should Be Avoided

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One lesson from New Orleans, Mirón said, is to avoid a state takeover in any similar effort at reform. "They clearly had alternatives," he said. "The state takeover model is really the model of last resort.... Change should come from within, in participation with the community."

When the state took over, it thought it would get hundreds of applications to run charters, but it didn't, Mirón said. The review process then took much longer than expected, and only a handful of charter schools were established. The state-run Recovery School District is now "in an absolute mess," and rushing to open 50-plus schools for the fall, he said.

"The whole irony of this is that what the elite business community in New Orleans wanted—which was to get control of the schools out of the hands of a central bureaucracy—is exactly what they seem to have unintentionally created in the Recovery School District," Mirón said.

Likewise, the state sought to establish charter schools in order to avoid running the schools itself, "but guess what—that's exactly what they're doing now," Mirón said.

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## Further Readings

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#### Source Citation:

"Post-Katrina School Reform Has Not Been Successful in New Orleans." *Hurricane*

*Katrina*. Diane Andrews Henningfeld. Detroit: Greenhaven Press, 2010. At Issue. *Gale Opposing Viewpoints In Context*. Web. 22 Dec. 2010.

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**Gale Document Number:** GALE|EJ3010721213